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# JOHN UPDIKE: A WISTFUL MASTER

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that it may have been a young widow named Faustina Antonini, whom Goethe met in January 1788, during the preparations for the Carnival. In a new book published during Goethe's anniversary year, Roberto Zappetti, a private scholar in Rome, points out, however, that, while there was a real Faustina Antonini, church records show that she died in 1784, more than two years before Goethe came to Rome.

Still, the identity of Goethe's Faustina is perhaps not as important as the fact that there was one, and—this is the real point of Zappetti's entertaining book—that Goethe was determined from the moment of his arrival in Rome that there should be. The difficulty was that his choice was restricted by the danger of venereal disease on the one hand and of marriage on the other, and much of Zappetti's book is devoted to describing his efforts to avoid both. In the end Goethe succeeded in finding an amenable partner who posed neither of those risks, and, in a chapter called "The Faustina Riddle," based upon intensive study of Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, his correspondence with his ducal patron, and new documents from German and Italian archives, Zappetti concludes that, although her name is unknown, she was a simple woman of the people, not a prostitute, who lived with her mother and met Goethe in January 1788, falling deeply in love with him, a passion that he reciprocated. Zappetti suggests that she was a Clärchen to Goethe's Egmont, representing the kind of free love that he had long dreamed of but never before attained, and that he was

grief-stricken when his return to Weimar forced him to end the affair. Forty years later he was to say to Eckermann, "I never again attained this height, this happiness of feeling. Compared with my circumstances in Rome I was really never happy again."

Immediately, the loss of his Roman love made Goethe disinclined to go back to the starved emotional life that had been his before his departure for Italy, and when, shortly after his return, he met Christiane Vulpius, the daughter of a long-established but impoverished Weimar family, he almost immediately took her into his bed and his home. Christiane probably bore a strong resemblance to the lost Faustina—good-looking, cheerful, basically intelligent and with some formal education, and willing to enter into a relationship with a man in middle years without asking him to make commitments. The affair shocked court society and ended Goethe's long relationship with Frau von Stein. Those who disapproved of it, including the duke, did not expect it to be of long duration. In fact, it lasted for twenty-eight years and was formalized by marriage in 1806.

Sigrid Damm's *Christiane und Goethe* spent a good deal of the poet's anniversary year at the top of the best-seller lists in Germany, as it certainly deserved to do. Based upon six hundred letters exchanged between Goethe and Christiane, as well as state and Church records, the Vulpius family archive, Goethe's household accounts, and the diary that Christiane

kept in the last six months of her life, it is the record of a warm but difficult relationship, perhaps, as Michael Butler has suggested, a love affair that was slowly dissolving,<sup>11</sup> although that is something the reader will have to decide for himself, for there are many gaps in the record, which Damm has wisely not sought to fill in by guesswork.

It is clear that Christiane's life with Goethe was never one of unalloyed happiness, for in the poet's life art took precedence over everything else. The happiest years were probably the first, when his passion was strongest and when his son August, of whom he was very fond, was growing up. Later, his absences from the house on the Frauenplan became frequent, either because he preferred to do his work in weeklong solitary stays in Jena or because the duke took him off on lengthy expeditions, as he did during the military campaign of 1792. Christiane had few friends of her own, and aristocratic society in Weimar either ignored or spread tales about her; Frau von Stein told the world that Goethe's "Demoiselle," as she called her, drank too much and was becoming fat, while Schiller, after his first stay in the house on the Frauenplan, neither acknowledged Christiane's presence nor thanked her for making him comfortable.

She put up with this and found her own amusements, learning to skate, going, with Goethe's approval, to re-

<sup>11</sup>Michael Butler, "A Splendid Unspoilt Creature," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 26, 1999, p. 27.

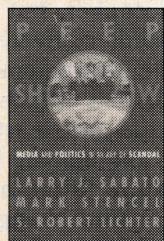
doutes and balls (she was an excellent dancer) or to the theater, and taking the waters in Lauchstädt, meanwhile performing with efficiency the formidable task of running the Weimar establishment, bearing four more children who did not survive, planting the gardens and raising vegetables, keeping household accounts, seeing to August's education, and answering the absent Goethe's frequent requests for delicacies ("I have done my best about the goose liver pastries, but there is no goose liver to be had, and no truffles"). Damm's account does not enable us to chart Goethe's emotional life as the years passed in any detail, but there is no reason to believe that his affection for and gratitude toward his "gleinen *Naturwesen*," as Christiane sometimes signed her letters, ever wavered. In 1806, after she had shown singular courage and presence of mind when French troops occupied their home in the wake of the battle of Jena, he finally married her, thus giving her a firm social status as Frau Geheime Räthin von Goethe and a financial security that she had not had before. And on August 16, 1813, the twenty-fifth anniversary of their love, he wrote and dedicated to her the poem "Gefunden" (Found), which tells of a youth who, on an aimless walk in the woods, finds a beautiful flower, which he resolves to pick but then, changing his mind, digs up instead with the roots:

*Und pflanzt es immer  
Am stillen Ort;  
Nun zweigt es immer  
Und blüht so fort.*

*(And plants it for ever*

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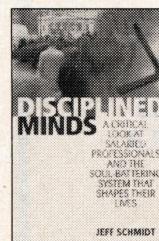
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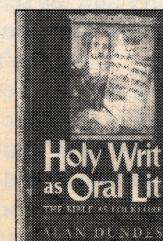


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